Landscape is personal

Landscape architecture is still a very young profession in Australia: next year the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects has its 40th anniversary. From the very start in Australia, architecture has played a key role in its sibling profession in a range of ways some of its first members were architects who had specialised in landscape architecture and who started the educational courses in landscape architecture; many prominent architects worked cooperatively (often more cooperatively than they do now) with those first landscape architects (such as John Stevens and Osborn McCutcheon) the RAIA and the AILA have shared facilities and staff professional landscape architects borrow the term architect from the RAIA and have therefore modelled their registration process on the architects and the model of what a design practice is and how it can be practised both come from architecture. To this we could add that architects have developed an increasing interest in the landscape. With this interest, however, is a subtle shift. An interest in the landscape is not necessarily an interest in either landscape architecture or landscape architects. That architecture is taking on the landscape and leaving its siblings behind makes the reminder that there is an historic design practice in landscape architecture and a vibrant contemporary one, even more important. Landscape architecture needs to reassert itself, and its particular appreciation of landscape, in an innovative and productive way.

Landscape architecture has seemed very much on the back foot in relation to what more it can offer than architecture, in terms of an approach to 'landscape'. While architecture in the sixties was interested in the relationship between the arts and the sciences as a potential generator of form, in the 1970s landscape architecture discovered in the science of ecology a seemingly objective basis to make design decisions by embracing science, on science's terms. In the process of doing this, it lost what design abilities it had developed through the 1950s and 1960s in the innovative design work of the modernist landscape architects Kiley, Eckbo and Rose. While these designers also talked about science in the garden, they did so in the inherently speculative manner of modernism. McHargian environmentalism locked landscape architecture out of design, and this lasted for 15 to 20 years, as the profession sought innovation by censuring subjective design decisions, with the aspiration to create a seemingly objective design process.

In the 1980s and 1990s theorists such as Steven Krog and Marc Treib championed a return to design as a central consideration and activity of landscape architecture, at a time when architects in Barcelona were providing a model for the potential of the design of public space to be rigorously formal, within the aggregate form of the city. This was largely an academic discourse (mostly originating from RMIT); however, the profession generally began to feel that there was a definite problem with 'design' in their projects. It is out of this anxiety that the practices and their projects documentedin this edition arose. This sense of a design discourse in landscape architecture took 10 years to build, and only now is there enough 'stuff' to have a broad, sophisticated and robust discussion about the work. Again, however, science is being looked to in order to reinvigorate the discipline – this time from James Corner and his protégés. There is no doubt that the science of the landscape and landscape processes constitutes a type of 'material' for landscape architecture; however, we should not be deferring design decisions when we use it, to scientific method, which will only ever be quasiscience anyway. There is again the potential now to regard the making of landscape form as somehow un-rigorous and subjective.

Landscape architects have a centre of focus that is the context of architecture: the broad, external tableaux of the landscape itself, the field. It is simultaneously everywhere, but often invisible as we search out objects to look at. Landscape architecture is a kind of attentiveness to the systems, flows and dynamics of the changing landscape, but it is also an almost nostalgically naïve ethic of stewardship. While naïve, this custodial position of landscape architecture is actually its ethical base

that is going to become more and more important, as the imperative of sustainability increases. Leon van Schaik has called this ethic the creation of “regimes of care”. Whenever one has to provide a functional rationale for almost any aspect of landscape architecture, this ethic, of care and responsibility for something, which is definitely not about direct utility, remains. Landscape architecture is a value system based around the interaction of people and the environment and between people themselves. Its very externality assures it a diversity, wildness and requirement for robustness that are its key differences to an architecture that is largely about segregation – separating uses, spaces, people, things, habits. Increasingly it is this very looseness that is attractive to people, while institutions everywhere are fighting to remove it, since they must have a justification for putting money into something that will never, really, return any to them.

In inviting writers to participate in this issue, we have clearly sought to counterpoint the real discourse, history and culture of Australian landscape architecture with the generalised ‘sense’ of the landscape that many architects are striving to achieve, or work with, in their projects. This edition should be seen as introducing, or consolidating existing introductions of, practitioners and thinkers about the landscape from a discourse where the notion of landscape is not an abstraction, but is a very real and ongoing phenomenon.

It would be a missed opportunity if I did not address the largely architectural readership of *AR* about how architecture and landscape architecture intersect at the level of budgets. As a landscape architect, I have noticed on a number of occasions what I could indulgently describe as (and utilising ‘fuzzy maths’) the inverse square law of architecture to landscape: architecture occupies landscape space and gets exponentially larger budgets, while the budget for landscape forever diminishes, regardless of the fact that the landscape, in fact, encompasses the entire physical context of architecture. If we speculate that the landscape construction budget is rarely more than 10 percent of the project budget, and the fees for landscape architects never more than 10 percent, it’s clear that the amount of time given by landscape architects to a metre of landscape is, by economic necessity, one hundredth that of architects given to a square metre of building.

If we then remove budgets and fees of the external areas given to civil engineers, such as car parks, then the percentages get even smaller. From these rough calculations it’s easy to see that the landscape and landscape architects are significantly under-resourced. The most basic solution to this might be to explore the way in which project budgets are negotiated, and to involve landscape architects in siting and civil decisions. Civil works are earthworks, and earth is clearly within the palette of the landscape architect. If I were being provocative, another solution could be as simple as downgrading one model of fixtures (such as door knobs) and consequently doubling the landscape budget. All this begs the question, perhaps the one landscape architects should ask at the beginning of any project: how important is the landscape to you?